

Painting with Words

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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יוצרת בכתיבה לתיזה מחקר הצעת

לאנגלית המחלקה

אילן-בר אוניברסיטת

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מנחה: פרופ' לינדה זיסקויט

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Introduction

For me, poetry has always held a strong connection to art. Growing up, I remember the sense of awe I felt when observing my mother as she would turn the dining room into her studio, sculpting porcelain dolls or painting scenes on fabric chairs. Since she emigrated from Ukraine to the United States as a girl, she speaks with broken English, though her paintings and sculptures are beautiful and smooth. For her, creating art is more powerful than forming words. It is her language. As I grew older, painting and creative writing through poetry became my two central forms of self-expression. The continuous artistic influences I received combined with my own passion for writing stirred the desire to reflect visual art through poetry—my desire to paint with words.

Aims and General Description

My project will consist of a collection of poems written in several poetic forms that will reflect visual art through various poetic techniques, exploring form, structure, and imagery. The poems will be divided into two main parts. The first section will be dedicated to ekphrastic poetry—poems that focus on the verbal representation of a work of art, such as a painting or sculpture. These poems will concentrate on the depiction and reinterpretation of an existing artistic piece. The second section will be dedicated to personal lyrical poems. These poems will express my personal connection to visual art and its creative process. The lyrical poems in this section may also include moments from unexpected everyday events and emotions.

I aim to write in a variety of forms that transform poems into visual works. Through writing in various forms, such as syllabic form, blank verse, and free verse, I will explore the different ways in which a poem itself can be seen as well as heard. In my reinterpretations of visual works of art through ekphrastic poetry, as well as in the personal “I” poems that speak from my own experiences, I aim to combine both the visual and auditory senses, transforming words into visual works of art.

Conceptual Background

There is a common notion that visual art cannot be put into words without a loss. The philosopher Ben-Ami Scharfstein writes in his book, *Art Without Borders*, “Visual messages can be fully conveyed only by means of their colors and shapes, which in turn arouse kinesthetic and synesthetic responses, for which there is hardly any vocabulary” (6). As a poet who writes about art and its creative process, I emulate poets such as John Keats and Marianne Moore, whom I find disprove this statement by bringing the images of their poem to life through vibrant imagery and visually telling line breaks. The painter Vincent van Gogh, while not a poet, has also been influential to my writing by means of his artistically written collection of letters that describe his own artistic process.

I first became inspired by ekphrastic poetry when reading the works of the Romantic poet John Keats. In his poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” written in 1819, Keats writes, “Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave / Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare; / Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss... yet, do not grieve; / She cannot fade, though thou hast not thou bliss, / For ever wilt thou love, and she be fare!” (ll. 15-20). In these lines, Keats brings the work of art to life, depicting how the lovers painted on the Grecian vase will live in the ideal moment of love and youth forever within the work of art. Similarly, the couple will be kept alive within the frame of the poem, as Keats places them within colorful scenery and gives the lovers a story. In this poem, Keats writes ekphrasis in order to reinterpret a work of art, giving the painting a renewed significance that the artist may not have intended to give.

In my endeavor to reflect visual art through poetry, the American modernist poet Marianne Moore has been influential. Similar to William Carlos Williams who made the well-known statement “no ideas but in things,” Moore was a member of the imagist movement in the

early twentieth-century, and wrote her poetry with a direct focus on concrete objects. Imagist poetry is significant in its tendency to create emotion through the images themselves, rather than through philosophizing. This is exemplified in Marianne Moore's syllabic poem, "The Fish":

sun,
split like spun
glass, move themselves with spotlight swiftness
into the crevices—
in and out, illuminating

As Moore's syllabics are descriptive poems often about perception, her use of enjambment helps to move images from abstract to solid. In this stanza, Marianne Moore skillfully creates movement and double imagery through enjambment. For instance, the word "sun" (l. 11) presents the sole image of a sun, but then changes with the word "split" (l. 12) in the following line. Similarly, "spun" (l. 12) is a word that moves from abstract to solid, as it is attached to "glass" (l. 13) in the following line, portraying the image of finely blown glass.

The visual form of Marianne Moore's poetry inspired my endeavor to reflect visual art through poetry. Syllabic poems are meant to be perceived with the eyes, since they are often two poems, the one that is spoken and the one that is seen. Therefore, there is significance in the way the poem is laid out on the page. The external form appears orderly, as each stanza contains the same number of syllables, though the content of the poem contains chaos of constantly changing images. In "The Fish," for instance, the form performs the content through the line breaks' appearance as waves pulling in and out.

Although the Post-Impressionist painter Vincent van Gogh was not a poet, I was nevertheless influenced by his evocative collection of letters that depict his artistic process of

creation. He writes in one of his letters, “There are many touches of yellow in the soil, neutral tones produced by mixing purple with yellow, but I couldn’t care less what the colours are in reality.... But when shall I ever get round to doing the starry night, that picture which is always in my mind” (361-362). The painter Vincent van Gogh describes his own vision and creative process when choosing his colors, subject, and style, just as a poet chooses his or her words, subject, and form. As the second part of my project will be dedicated to personal lyrical poems that relate to art and painting while also leaving room to include the unexpected daily events and emotions, I found these letters to be extremely inspiring and beneficial in understanding my own process of creation, and role as an artist.

In my study of ekphrastic poetry and its particular style and structure, I turn to John Hollander’s *The Gazer’s Spirit*. This book presents poems side by side with the work of art being addressed, as the words and images are placed in conversation with one another. In his introduction, Hollander describes Socrates’ philosophy, that a painting of a bed is three times removed from true “Bedness.” Even more so, he writes, “An ekphrasis of the picture would be even more distant from reality. But the power of Art depends upon the power of those degrees of fictiveness: a thrice-removed painting can get at true Bedness better than a bed can.... And ultimately, Poetry seems to imply, it can at very least help Art to make its point by showing how, in particular cases, Art is being made” (7). When writing ekphrasis, my aim is to follow this notion of allowing my poetry to speak in conversation with a painting or other form of art, and to bring the image to life with words.

Shape of the Project

The project will consist of approximately 60 short poems divided into two separate sections. The first will be dedicated to ekphrastic poetry, and the second will be dedicated to personal lyrical poems. In each section, I will write in a variety of poetic forms to convey meaning through line breaks, musical rhythm, and vibrant imagery. I aim to transform my poems into visual pieces, or at least to apply sound and meter to arouse synesthetic responses in my attempt to reflect the content of a painting or artistic technique. These poems will focus on my own experiences with the process of creating art, as well as my connection to existing art pieces made by different artists in various periods of time.

The first section will explore ekphrastic poetry, pairing verses with particular works of art. The poems will interpret, as well as communicate with existing artworks in a way that brings a renewed meaning and perspective. Writing in forms such as syllabics will allow the poems' auditory content to be combined with more visual features, as the form will contain meaning on its own, working alongside the content. Poetic forms that are concerned with strict meter and rhythm, such as blank verse, also have the ability to arouse synesthetic responses that I hope will bring the paintings to life and create additional meaning.

The second section will focus on my own artistic process as a painter, as well as my experiences growing up with a mother who is an artist. This section will also include poetry that concerns daily events and relates to my relationship with my mother, one that is largely surrounded by our mutual connection to art. As the second section is from a more personal perspective, most of the poems in this section will be written in a lyrical form, and structured as autobiographical poems. Similar to the first section on ekphrastic poetry, this section will consist of visual poems that incorporate line breaks, enjambment, structure, and meter in order to

combine the auditory senses with the visual.

In short, I aim to counter the notion stated by Ben-Ami Scharfstein, that visual art “cannot be put into words without great loss” (6). By reflecting the content of an existing work of art or artistic technique through various poetic forms, such as syllabic form, free verse, and blank verse, I intend to combine both the visual and auditory senses. Through this combination of the senses, as well as through the emphasis on the image itself and the creative process, I aim to devote this project to the reflection of visual art through poetry.

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